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Shakespeare's *Othello* has exercised a powerful fascination over audiences for centuries with its intense portrayal of passionate love and destructive jealousy. This study is a major exercise in the historicization of *Othello*. Initially the author examines the early Jacobean context of the play, and the discourses which formed its writing. Circulating simultaneously in late Renaissance London were accounts of Mediterranean clashes between Turks and Venetians, treatises on the professionalization of England's military forces, depictions of North Africans and blackamoors, and narratives of jealous husbands who murdered their wives. In the centuries after 1604, productions of *Othello* stressed the contextual discourse that best reflected current cultural concerns.

The first section examines these four sets of contemporary writings and demonstrates how they were embedded in the text of *Othello*. The following chapters trace *Othello*'s history on stage or in film in England and the United States from the Restoration to the late 1980s. Each chapter highlights particular productions or performers to demonstrate how and why elements from Shakespeare's text were emphasized or repressed. In the Restoration, for example, Othello was a gentleman and an officer, his characterization shaped by actors who had served in King Charles' army. During the Victorian period, in contrast, the Moor's private role of devoted husband was privileged over his occupation. When Paul Robeson performed Othello in 1930 and 1943–44, race was highlighted as the play's central issue. *Othello* is thus revealed as a significant shaper and major reflector of cultural meanings, as it participated in a complex negotiation between actors, critics, audiences, and the culture at large.

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OTHELLO

A contextual history

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*For the Welsh boys
Where I have garnered up my heart*

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
Introduction	i
PART I: JACOBEAN CONTEXTS	
1 Global discourse: Venetians and Turks	13
2 Military discourse: knights and mercenaries	35
3 Racial discourse: black and white	51
4 Marital discourse: husbands and wives	71
PART II: REPRESENTATIONS	
5 <i>Othello</i> in Restoration England	93
6 Amateur versus professional: the Delaval <i>Othello</i>	113
7 William Charles Macready and the domestic <i>Othello</i>	135
8 Salvini, Irving, and the dissociation of intellect	158
9 “The Ethiopian Moor”: Paul Robeson’s <i>Othello</i>	181
10 Orson Welles and the patriarchal eye	199
11 <i>Othello</i> for the 1990s: Trevor Nunn’s 1989 Royal Shakespeare Company production	217
Conclusion	233
<i>Index</i>	238

Illustrations

- | | | |
|---------|---|-----|
| 1 | A Venetian courtesan from Thomas Coryat's <i>Crudities</i> (1611). Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library. | 18 |
| 2 | The frontispiece to Machiavelli's <i>Arte of Warre</i> , translated into English in 1560. Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library. | 38 |
| 3 | The figure of "A Moor" from Cesare Vecellio's <i>Degli habiti</i> (Venice, 1590). Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library. | 57 |
| 4 and 5 | Sultan Ionuses and his wife Manto from Richard Knolles' <i>Generall Historie of the Turkes</i> (1603). Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library. | 81 |
| 6 | The frontispiece to Nicholas Rowe's edition of <i>Othello</i> (1709). Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library. | 110 |
| 7 | Francis Hayman's engraving of Othello and Desdemona from Thomas Hanmer's 1743–44 edition of Shakespeare. Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library. | 118 |
| 8 | The playbill for William Charles Macready's 1837 Covent Garden <i>Othello</i> . Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library. | 141 |
| 9 | William Charles Macready as Othello. Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library. | 143 |
| 10 | George Ellis' costume drawing for Iago in William Charles Macready's Covent Garden <i>Othello</i> (1837). Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library. | 144 |
| 11 | George Ellis' drawing of the setting for the murder scene in William Charles Macready's 1837 Covent Garden <i>Othello</i> . Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library. | 152 |
| 12 | Tommaso Salvini as Othello. From the author's personal collection. | 164 |

- | | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 13 | Henry Stephen Ludlow's engraving of "Henry Irving as Iago." Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library. | 177 |
| 14 | James Pryde's set for the murder scene in the Savoy Theatre's 1930 production of <i>Othello</i> . Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library. | 186 |
| 15 | The "Captious Critic" with caricatures of Paul Robeson as Othello from the <i>Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News</i> (7 June 1930). Courtesy of the British Library. | 189 |
| 16 | The program cover from Margaret Webster's 1943-44 production at the Shubert Theatre, New York, featuring Paul Robeson as Othello. From the author's personal collection. | 194 |
| 17 | A still from Orson Welles' 1952 film. Othello (Orson Welles) gazes at the body of Desdemona (Suzanne Cloutier). Courtesy of Castle Hill Productions, Inc. | 215 |
| 18 | Othello kisses Desdemona in the Cyprus quay scene from Trevor Nunn's 1989 Royal Shakespeare Company production. From the Joe Cocks Studio Collection at the Shakespeare Centre Library. | 223 |
| 19 | Othello (Willard White) beside Iago (Sir Ian McKellen) in the temptation scene from Trevor Nunn's 1989 Royal Shakespeare Company production. From the Joe Cocks Studio Collection at the Shakespeare Centre Library. | 225 |

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